

Ecumenism a survival strategy in Middle East

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In most parts of the world, ecumenism is seen by Christians either as a Gospel imperative or simply as a good cause, a way of healing historical wounds and reaching out to fellow believers.

In the Middle East, however, it's a survival strategy - a way for the region's tiny Christianity minority to hang together, so they don't end up hanging separately.

Calls for concrete steps towards unity have been heard repeatedly throughout the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which is now at the midway point. On Saturday, participants discussed a first draft of their final message, which will be amended and then presented for a final vote next week.

A harrowing reminder of what the Christians are up against in some parts of the Middle East came from Archbishop Athanase Matti Shaba Matoka, the Syrian Catholic leader in Baghdad, Iraq. It was testimony that carries special resonance for Americans.

Since the year 2003, Christians are the victims of a killing situation, which has provoked great emigration from Iraq, Matoka said. Half the Christians have abandoned Iraq, and without a doubt there are only about 400,000 Christians left of the 800,000 that lived there.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: [Index of stories from the Synod](#) [1].

The invasion of Iraq by America and its allies brought to Iraq in general, and especially to its Christians, destruction and ruin on all levels, Matoka said. Churches were blown up, bishops and priests and lay persons were massacred, many were the victims of aggression. Doctors and business persons were kidnapped, others were threatened, storage places and homes were pillaged.

If the big-picture issues are how to stem the out-migration of Christians and to build civil, secular societies in the Middle East, pushing both Israel and Muslim states toward greater pluralism and equality before the law for all citizens, a four-stage strategy is beginning to come into focus as to how Christians can be in a better position to do all that:

Overcoming the denominationalism that sometimes mars relations among the Eastern Catholic churches of the region;

Cajole the dominant Latin tradition in Catholicism to show greater respect, and greater theological and canonical deference, to the Eastern churches;

Build ecumenical unity with other Christians, especially the Orthodox - partly as a show of unity vis-à-vis

both Jews and Muslims, and partly as a way of resisting the "sects," usually referring to Evangelical and Pentecostal movements across the region with U.S. backing; "Mobilize Catholics elsewhere, especially the West, to greater investments of time and treasure in aiding the churches of the Middle East.

Ideas on each of those fronts have been heard in the last couple of days on the floor of the synod.

In terms of intra-Catholic ecumenism, Greek Melkite Bishop Joseph Absi of Syria said on Friday that "rivalries between Eastern Catholic churches, or within the same church, are a source of weakening and false witness."

There are a total of 22 Eastern Catholic churches in union with Rome and therefore fully part of the global Catholic Church, of which six are especially present in the Middle East: Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Melkite and Syrian, along with the Latin Rite church.

Absi offered a concrete suggestion for moving beyond intra-Catholic turf wars: permitting and expanding "biritualism," so that if a parish has to be abandoned for one reason or another by one of the Eastern Catholic churches, another can step in and keep it going.

In terms of promoting more respect for the Eastern Churches within Catholicism, Italian Archbishop Angelo Amato drew applause Friday afternoon when he announced that the Congregation for the Causes of Saints intends to give "preferential treatment" to the candidacies of new saints from the Eastern churches. At the moment, Amato said, 23 such causes are underway, involving Eastern Catholics from the Middle East and from their communities overseas.

American Cardinal William Levada, who heads the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, likewise announced plans to invite the doctrinal commissions of the Eastern churches to discuss how the role of the pope could be "exercised in different ways, according to the diverse needs of times and places."

Presumably, that conversation would include how the Vatican might give the Eastern churches some latitude to preserve their distinctive spiritual, liturgical, and disciplinary traditions.

Archbishop Cyril Vasil, a Slovakian Jesuit who serves as secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Eastern Churches, called for launching a program in Eastern Catholic theological studies in Rome.

Yet Vasil also seemed to put the ball to some extent in the court of the Eastern churches, saying some of the responsibility for what Eastern Catholics often regard as insensitivity in the West may actually lie with them.

For example, some Eastern bishops in the synod have argued that the Vatican should either back down from insistence on papal approval for the election of bishops by Eastern synods, or at least speed the process up. Yet Vasil implied the problem isn't just in Rome: "Checks on the suitability of candidates should be carried out by the bishops and the synod in a more appropriate manner than sometimes happens at present," he said, "in order to facilitate and speed up the process of pontifical assent."

Other Eastern Catholic bishops have proposed extending the authority of their patriarchs over their faithful who have migrated elsewhere, especially the United States and other Western nations. Here again, Vasil seemed to suggest that the Easterners themselves need to take the initiative.

"Sometimes the 'planetary' extension of the patriarchs' jurisdiction is claimed, as if this were a right and universal solution to the problem of pastoral care for migrants," he said. "It should be remembered that between the claimed universal right, and the detailed, justified request, there is a great difference."

Not surprisingly, some of the strongest ecumenical calls came as the "fraternal delegates," meaning the representatives of other Christian churches, addressed the synod.

The Syro-Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo in Syria, Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, argued that the path to unity between Catholics and Orthodox lies in "separating communion from authority" — a common Orthodox talking point in dialogue with Catholicism.

In effect, it means unity in faith but not submission to the jurisdiction of the pope.

Ibrahim also floated a practical ideal that's an especially ardent ecumenical dream in the Middle East: a common date for Easter.

"Christians are waiting impatiently to see their unity represented by this symbol," he said.

Catholicism and the other churches of the West following the Gregorian calendar in fixing the date for Easter and other liturgical feasts, while Orthodox churches observe the older Julian calendar. (In 2011, the two happen to coincide on April 24.)

Ibrahim also proposed a single feast day for all Christian churches to celebrate the martyrs of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In terms of mobilizing broad Catholic support for the Christians of the Middle East, a slew of concrete ideas were floated on Friday and Saturday:

- Promoting Arab-Christian literature.

- Supporting the small, but growing, Hebrew-speaking Catholic community in Israel, which is being gradually swelled by the arrival of foreign workers in Israel;

- Encouraging pilgrimage to the Middle East, focused not just on the holy sites of the region but also the living Christian communities. One participant from Iraq proposed that all the bishops of the world, both Western and Eastern, established fixed annual dates for pilgrimage, so there's a constant flow of pilgrims into the Holy Land throughout the year.

- Investments in housing and health care, especially in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, where recent land-use policies of the Israeli government have made it more difficult for Christians to acquire homes.

- Micro-finance for small-scale Christian entrepreneurs and "micro-insurance" to cover health care costs. One participant floated the idea of a church-administered insurance program for young Christian couples and families.

- Encouraging Western companies to transfer manufacturing processes to the Middle East.

- Creation of a new bank for support of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, run by the region's Catholic bishops, to finance purchases of land and the construction of housing.

- Waiving tuition costs in Catholic schools for the Christians of the region — especially for large families with more than two children, to counteract what some observers say is a worrying drop in family size among Christians.

- Providing young Christian families with plots of land under a kind of "emphyteutic lease" for 99 years, meaning an obligation to improve the property through construction, which would eventually lead to a transfer of title to the inhabitants.

Participants will have to decide this week which, if any, of these ideas will be included in the propositions to be presented to Pope Benedict XVI at the close of the synod this week.

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